

## **“So What’s on *Your* Bucket List?”**

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church  
for Sunday, October 23, 2016

Stewardship 4 Sunday – Living as a Generous People

**Scripture Readings: Joel 2:23-32, Luke 18:9-14**

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Today I want to ask a question that I am sure has been burning inside of you for a long time: “What’s on your bucket list?” For some years, now, people have developed their own “bucket list” as to what they wish to do during their lifetime before they “kick the bucket.”

You may be surprised to learn that the use of the term in regular parlance is much more recent than at first imagined. And the term has multiple applications.

A bucket list may be from a young person looking forward in his/her life, seeking to maximize goals where opportunities may seem limited, or a bucket list may be a way to list what someone wants to see and do in a life that is wrapping up soon, but the person still has the strength and ability to do much in the months and years ahead.

Do you have a bucket list? Bucket lists became popular, or at least more noteworthy in ordinary discussion, in the last couple of decades.

Back in 1999, Justin Zackham had a list of items on his bulletin board that were “Things Justin wants to do before he kicks the bucket. “ That list inspired a 2007 screenplay, eventually made into a movie starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman simply entitled “The Bucket List.” These two men had their own “bucket list” as they faced their future with terminal cancer.

A bucket list now may be more than just a list we want to accomplish before we die. It can be a list for a season, or a trip, or even for a limited time as we plan ahead. We all can fill a bucket with hopes, dreams, and anticipation.

You might be asking right now, as you probably do at this point in most sermons, so what does a bucket list have to do with our Stewardship focus and the scriptures for today?

Well, today is a day to focus on what it means to live as a generous people. And the scriptures for today focus not on how are we going to fill our own buckets, but what we need to accomplish and to achieve within this lifetime.

Joel reminds us that no matter our age, even the old can “dream dreams” and the young can “see visions.” Life is made full when we seek to dream about ways that the world may be made better.

Life is always about dreaming dreams. When we lose that sense of the future, and what we can offer, we lose that sense of life itself, no matter our age.

Years ago Martin Luther King Jr. was asked why he went around the country speaking in dangerous situations. Why did he not protect himself and stop being in public places where his life could be endangered?

King replied (in so many words) that he may act in a way to protect his body from harm, but his life would be over at that point because his soul would be dead. There would be no reason to carry on if he abandoned his message and purpose in life.

And Luke tells the story of a Pharisee and Tax Collector where the latter has a better sense of both humility in life, and purpose for the future, than the recognized religious leader.

Bucket lists are not about what we can do to fill our own “buckets,” but what we want to achieve, accomplish, and leave as a legacy.

The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector may have an uncertain ring to the modern ear. After all, the Pharisee may seem like a fine church person today. He spent his life avoiding doing that which was evil, and never was unhelpful or aggressive to others.

So why was Jesus so adamantly critical of him?

Joseph Fitzmeyer, in his Anchor Bible commentary on Luke’s gospel, suggests we should not overlook the bigger picture Jesus presents by getting caught up in the smaller issues of our own day.

And what is the bigger picture here? I would suggest that Jesus is troubled by the Pharisee for he defines his life by what he is not. He does not define himself by what he seeks to be, or even more, what he can be in the service of others.

The Pharisee sees justice as making sure he does less evil than the person next to him; Jesus calls us to do more good. He wanted to look good by offering prayer, look good by giving his tithes and offerings, look good when he came to public worship, in short, look better than those around him (in a modern sense he made sure he did not associate with “a basket of deplorables”), but he was not transformed and changed by any of those experiences.

I think that reality is summed up by the quest for a bucket list. Are we looking for things to do so we feel good, we have experiences that we can selfishly enjoy, or are we looking for ways that we can continue to make our lives meaningful and spirit-filled for the future?

What’s on your bucket list? Is it a list burdened with expectations, or is it a list buoyant by the opportunity to be in partnership with others, supporting life that is joyful and encouraging for you and for others?

Your bucket list may be more than a testimony to your own future just as the bucket list of this congregation may be, I hope, more than a plan for those of us here for the years ahead. It may reveal, if we have got the message of the gospel clear, an indication that we seek to be a people who make a difference, and not simply take up space in some valuable property in downtown Sudbury. I think this worship space is one of the most beautiful sanctuaries in all of the United Church, never mind in northern Ontario, but our goal should not be simply preserving what we have.

God calls us not to triumphantly remember the greatness of the past – we are not Pharisees in waiting. God calls us to see the possibilities for the future, and rejoice and be glad that we can be an important part of what shall unfold.

As we plan ahead, celebrating the generosity of many, may we create opportunities for our old to dream dreams, and our young to see visions, inspired by Christ.